

AN INSCRIPTION (1533) AND A LETTER (1798)

Joseph M. Brincat

THE INSCRIPTION

In the village of Gudja stands a small old house, situated in Main Street, number 83, which proudly parades an intriguing inscription above the door of what must have been a stable, now partly blocked up (pg.1) The letters are engraved in relief and are presently in a rather bad shape, obviously due to the corrosive action of the weather and pollution agents. The owner however deserves credit for sparing it when the wall was plastered. Nine letters are missing, completely or partly, but the surviving ones still allow deciphering (pg.2)

At first one gets the impression of a Greek script because of the letters pi and rho in the first line. There are two graphemes for the *M*, a square one for the phoneme in *Maius* and a rounded one (Gothic?) for the numerical symbol meaning one thousand. The *X* indicating the number ten is very elaborate and shaped like two *Cs* back to back held together by a dash in the middle. The square *M* suggests that the letter shaped like a Greek capital *pi* is actually an *N*, making it relatively easy to fill in the missing letters and read

ANNO INCARNAC
IONIS CRISTI MCCC
CCXXXIII dIe XXIII dI MAIUS

As regards the graphic aspect, apart from the use of the Greek letters pi and rho for *N* and *R* one can also note that the letters *d* and *e* are not in Roman capitals, as one would expect them to be in a Latin inscription. In fact they look like small letters extended to the size of capitals, the *d* occurring twice in a very rounded style with the top part bent forward, while the *e* is rather narrow and sort of squashed at the top.

It is rather curious that the word which has come down in the worst condition is *Cristi*, in spite of its central position. It is also the only word on which there is disagreement between P.F. Bellanti and Sir Themistocles Zammit who both copied it in their unpublished notes.¹ Although in their time pollution was not what it is today (traffic in Main Street, Gudja is surprisingly frequent and rather noisy even

¹ P.F. Bellanti, *Manuscript Notes on various Archaeological Sites in the Maltese Islands*, Museum of Archeology, DAG 16.100 MSS 13, p. 17. T. Zammit, *Archaeological Field Notes: Notebook No 3, 1909-12*, DAG 16.100 MSS 16, p. 130. I thank my colleague Mario Buhagiar for pointing out these references, as well as for reading correctly the second number of the date in the Letter below.

on a Saturday afternoon), the two transcriptions seem to be a reconstruction rather than a reproduction of the actual state the inscription was in, especially in Zammit's case. Bellanti however admitted difficulty by writing CI'ITI whereas Zammit has CIPSTI. Although there is no sign of the vertical line of the *P*, the wide *C* shows a small rounded figure at its top end which resembles the top of the *P* in the line above it. What remains of the *T* is quite recognizable but the tapering *S* and the *I* flanking it are very faint. Neither Bellanti nor Zammit give any information about the building. The latter however records the exact date when he copied it "Friday 26th November 1911", and adds that he was in the company of Prof. Tagliaferro, Mr. and Mrs. Peet and Mr. Whittmore.

From the linguistic point of view it is interesting to note a few pointers showing that the inscription did not belong to the higher cultural level, which means that it was not a very formal one. First of all there a *C* in the suffix of INCARNACIONIS where etymology prescribes a *T*. This was not unusual in the Middle Ages, in fact I have met with quite a number of examples in Latin texts written in Sicily: *caucione* (1285), *solucione* (1312), *iusticia* (1373), *mercanciis* (1401) *existencium* (1455).² In this context the letter *C*, like the correct *T*, was read *Z*. The influence of Italian is evident in the spelling of *Cristi* without the etymological *h* (*Christi*) and in the preposition *di* which precedes *Maius* in the nominative case. The avoidance of the genitive, which would have been more appropriate here, shows inconsistency for the case turns up in the phrase *Anno Incarnacionis Cristi*. One notes therefore that it is used in the stereotyped formula which gives the year but not in the indication of the day of the month. The use of prepositions was never admitted in Classical Latin but it emerged very early in the Middle Ages in Vulgar Latin and Church Latin. In fact there are examples dating from the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. in the *Vulgate* of St. Jerome³ and the *Peregrinatio Aetheriae ad loca sancta*.⁴ For these reasons the Gudja inscription is in contrast with most contemporary Latin inscriptions which were generally formal and correct.⁵

² G. Caracausi, *Arabismi medievali di Sicilia*, Palermo, 1983, pp. 129, 157, 166.

³ F. Sabatini, *La lingua e il nostro mondo*, Torino, 1980, pp. 119 and 132.

⁴ L. Renzi, *Nuova introduzione alla filologia romanza*, Bologna, 1985, p.314.

⁵ G.F. Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano*, Malta, 1647, pp.363-5, 369.

THE LETTER

I am reproducing a document signed by Napoleon Bonaparte written in Malta on the 25th prairial of the 6th year of the Republic, that is on the 13th June 1798 (according to the Republican calendar the prairial started on the 20th May):

République Française
Liberté Egalité
Au Quartier Général de Malthe le 21 prairéal an 6 de la République
Une, et Indivisible
Bonaparte, Membre de l'Institut National: Général en Chef.
Ordonne que l'Eglise de St. Jean soit
mise à la disposition de l'Evêque de Malthe
pour servir de concalped'are.

Bonaparte

The document is kept in the Archives of the Archbishop's Curia in Floriana (Archivum Archiepiscopale Melitense, Segreteria tom. XXIV, 1796-1801, ser. III, vol. V, 5, f.639). It is considered to be of the utmost importance for it should throw light on the vexed question of the ownership of St. John's Co-Cathedral, but the last word is very intriguing and seems to be a *hapax legomenon*. In view of this the Church and State authorities have sought help from French experts through the official channels, but to no avail. As it is written the word is inexplicable and a thorough linguistic and philological investigation is necessary.

Graphically the word shows that it should belong to the learned register, mainly by the consonant group *lp* which is not typical of popular modern French, where *lp* usually becomes *up*: compare medieval Latin *colpum*, Italian *colpo* and French *coup*, as well as popular French *coupable* and learned French *culpabilité*. The prefix *con-* confirms that the word should be a Latin loan presumably belonging to the legal or religious register. However it is not entered in the specialized dictionaries I have consulted.

The next step entailed a search for other documents emanating from the same source in order to check the word's spelling and to make sure that it is being read correctly. The other French documents in the same volume are not in the same handwriting. There are however various drafts or copies of letters addressed to the French rulers. Since this order of Napoleon seems to be a reply to a formal request by the bishop, I checked to see if a copy or draft of the bishop's original letter would turn up. Such a document would certainly contain the word which specified what use the bishop wanted to make of St. John's. I would expect the phrase "pour servir de

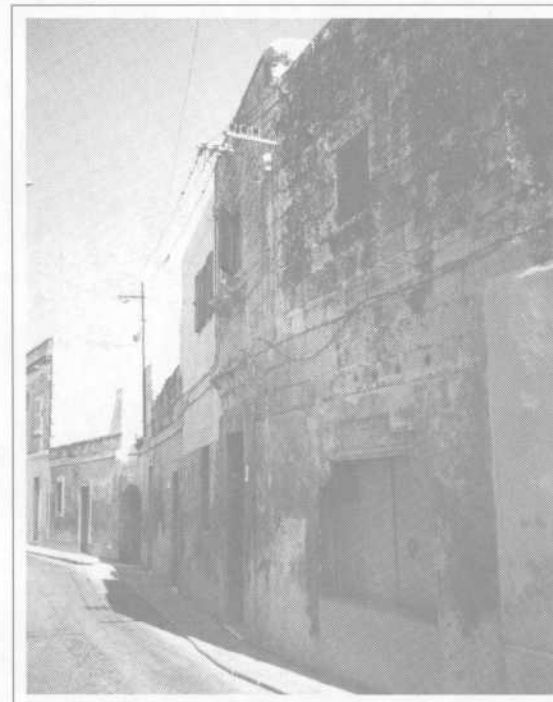
...” to be in the petition, either in French or in Italian. Unluckily I could trace no such document.

With reference to St. John’s there is an original letter from Vaubois, dated 27 prairial, that is six days after Napoleon’s autographed document, which asks the Bishop to open the door of St. John’s so that some officers could draw up an inventory (doc. f.638r). There is also a copy of an order by General Bonaparte, dated 28th prairial, where in article 6 he advises that in St. John’s, as well as in all the other churches, what is necessary for religious worship should be left there (doc. f.634). St. John’s is always referred to as “l’Eglise de St. Jean”.

Since the usual directions for research did not bear fruit, the only way to a solution is by conjecture on the scientific basis of spelling and semantic appropriateness. Among the words which may fit in the context (what use could a bishop have for such a church?) there is one of the same length and which corresponds to the mysterious one in nine out of thirteen letters:

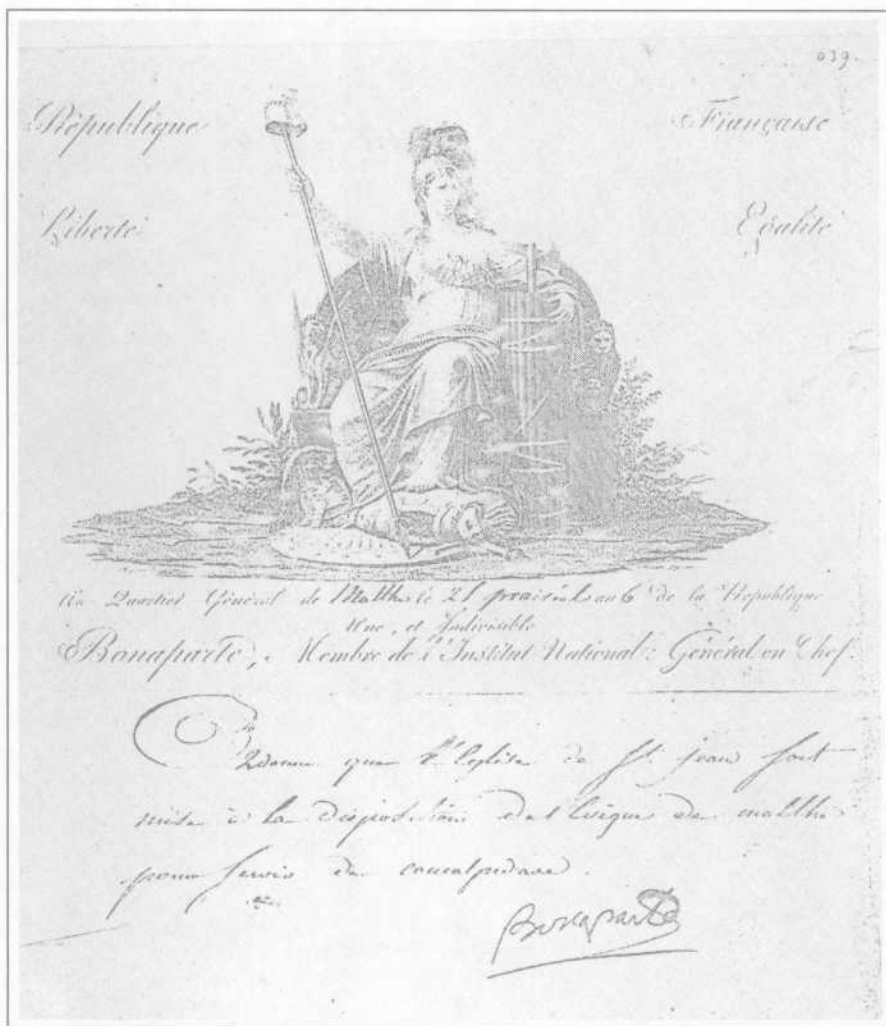
concalped'are
concathedrale.

Such a serious mistake in a short official document is not very common, but in the few feverish days that Napoleon spent in Malta he may either not have noticed the scribe’s misspelling or else he did not consider it all that important. The secretary who was drawing up the answer to the Bishop’s petition must have found the original word in the petition or in the draft answer incomprehensible, and he could have copied it by trying to decipher the single letters. Actually *concathédrale* is not a common word and it was obviously new to Malta in those days. Up till then there was only one cathedral, in Mdina, and St. John’s was known as the “conventual” church. The compound word is still not entered in the popular English and French dictionaries (Collins, Larousse) and even in Italian it is registered in Zanichelli’s larger *Nuovo Zingarelli* but not in the *edizione minore*.



1 and 2. House in Gudja with angular Gothic inscription.





3. Facsimile of Napoleon's rescript on the Conventual Church of St. John dated 13th June 1798.